

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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Volume 11  
Issue 4 December 2008

Article 3

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12-1-2008

# Archaeology, Obama, and the Long Civil Rights Movement

Christopher N. Matthews  
*Hofstra University*, anthczm@hofstra.edu

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### Recommended Citation

Matthews, Christopher N. (2008) "Archaeology, Obama, and the Long Civil Rights Movement," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol11/iss4/3>

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## December 2008 Newsletter

### Archaeology, Obama, and the Long Civil Rights Movement<sup>1</sup>

By Christopher N. Matthews

Does Barack Obama know about African Diaspora archaeology? Should he? What uses for African Diaspora archaeology might he imagine or hope for?<sup>2</sup> Most ADAN readers likely agree that the significance of African Diaspora archaeology is its contribution of new knowledge about a people who suffered a series of injustices including capture, forced migration, enslavement, enduring racism and inequality in the making of America. Certainly Barack Obama would be interested to know how we examine these problems. We might tell him that archaeology addresses these issues by recovering information from a different record, one produced by captive Africans and their descendents themselves; one that offers the contemporary world a tangible connection to the African American past that most documents fail to provide. I am sure Obama would be excited to know that the ground under his feet contains a distinct and important history in the form broken pots, bones, pits, foundation stones, and other objects that can be experienced now in much the same way they were in the past. Moreover, I am sure that most archaeologists would eagerly like to show Obama how to read objects as evidence of foodways, social life, belief and resistance. I wonder, though, if he

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<sup>1</sup> The author is Executive Director of the Center for Public Archaeology and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Hofstra University. The “Long Civil Rights Movement” referred to in the title of this article refers to a deeper history of civil rights than the era typically bounded by the activism of the 1950s and 60s. It also includes ongoing civil rights efforts in the present. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* March 2005.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Barack Obama does know about African Diaspora Archaeology. Serving as U.S. Senator for Illinois, he wrote during the final week of his presidential campaign, on October 27, 2008, a letter of support for the nomination of the New Philadelphia Town Site as a National Historic Landmark. For a detailed update on the New Philadelphia project see Charlotte King’s article in this Newsletter issue and visit: <http://www.anthro.uiuc.edu/faculty/cfennell/NP/updates.html>.

would leave knowing everything we would want him to know. I expect not. In fact, I believe most encounters Obama would have with African Diaspora archaeology would have little impact on him, let alone on his policies regarding the diverse descendents of those who make up the subject of our work.

While it is likely that President Obama will not visit an African Diaspora archaeological site, it is very probable that he will visit archaeological sites abroad in places like Israel, Iraq, China, or Egypt. These nations (and others) are easy to list here because their archaeological remains are an integral part of their modern national identities. It is unfortunate that the first African American President likely knows very little about African American archaeology and cannot therefore take advantage of the similar political opportunities its sites present. I think this a profound professional failure, and I urge archaeologists of the African Diaspora to make every effort to change this state of affairs.

To gain Obama's attention we need to take politics seriously. There is a lot we can learn from his political success in terms of organizing, staying on message, and building coalitions that will both broaden and deepen our impact. Yet, public archaeology politicking needs to follow after an engagement with the politics of archaeological knowledge, which are the very politics that will put Obama together with other world leaders in the presence of the Great Sphinx or among the Terra Cotta Warriors and which will keep him away from Mulberry Row at Monticello or the African Burial Ground in New York City. The problem for Obama is that the message about African Americans at these sites derives in no small part from our discipline's desire to avoid politics. This decision, one actively made every time an archaeologist believes they are simply studying the past, separates the archaeology of the African Diaspora from the racial politics that created and sustain the distinctions of African Diaspora communities. Without an informed and direct sense of the specific politics we engage, archaeologists produce an African Diaspora past without a purpose, and thus we leave sites open to a troublingly wide array of interpretations, from white supremacist notions of African American inferiority, to black nationalist notions of immutable cultural distinction by virtue of race. Our work must be as politically informed, organized, and directed as these extremes if it is to stand up to their challenges and be able to offer viable alternatives that provide insight and opportunity to antiracist social movements.

## **Present and Past**

No politician will come near a place where the making of the site was not formed through conscious political engagement. Archaeologists of the African Diaspora provide interesting data, interpretations, and new histories to work with, but we too often fail to address and engage the processes that in fact made the sites we excavate ‘archaeological,’ processes that are as much a component of the making of the Diaspora as the potting, gardening, eating, and conjuring that otherwise speak for past Diaspora peoples in archaeology. Why are so many excavated African Diaspora sites buried, in ruins, or recently renovated into museums, while so many places “whites” have lived are still in use? Why are the people of the Diaspora and their descendents we are interested in no longer in residence, while so many “whites” still are? A trajectory from past to present, from living worlds to archaeological remains, is a significant part of archaeology’s popular appeal. In most cases, this appeal draws from archaeology’s illustration of progressive change or the materialization of a powerful cultural continuity between past and present. However, in no case is the ‘making of the archaeological’ not an appropriation of history for the sake of defining the present. I wonder how often archaeologists also do this? One answer is that we appropriate the past every time we work. It is our livelihood and our passion. Another question is how often do archaeologists appropriate the past on behalf of others? The answer here is almost never because our work is overtly designed to be apolitical, to be about anything other than the ‘making of archaeology’ in the present. This needs to change, otherwise we are left with little understanding of how archaeology itself is a form of making history, a process that changes what we know about the present.

To be sure, there is a great deal of politically motivated research in African Diaspora Archaeology. ADAN readers make up a pleasing antiracist chorus, working to define the origins and contours of modern social problems like racial segregation, impoverishment and other structural bases of American racism and inequality. It is the historical roots of the present’s failures that drive many of us to dig up African America’s silenced past. The issue is that our desire for this knowledge usurps the political efficacy of what we can hope to accomplish by creating it. As we look back, we divert our attention, along with that of anyone standing with us, away from the present to the past. Even when we are at our most astute and

unpack socially constructed misconceptions about the histories of race and African Americans in early America, we count on readers to construct new metaphors on their own. Rarely do archaeologists provide informed and relevant guideposts to how an awareness of the social construction of race might serve people now. Another way to think about this is that if we as individuals are so interested in helping to combat racism, why are we doing archaeology? Why not go into law, community organizing, or politics?

I am not the first archaeologist to come to this conclusion. Others have expressed similar frustrations and disappointments. Some have left the field or de-prioritized it as they found other ways to make a difference. However, I have hope for archaeology, and this lies in the notion of the ‘archaeological’ that I started to describe before. Asking “what makes it archaeological?” moves us to come to know the present as a place that *lacks* what once was very much right here. The purpose of this exercise is twofold. First, we are led to imagine, as I think so many archaeo-philos do, the end of these past lives and histories. I think such imaginings help us to consider the fears past people were driven by: fears of death, loss, devastation, and uprooting, fears of change, violent or slow. Setting past people amidst their anxieties gives them different motivations than hunger, resistance, power, and love, and puts people in conditions that I think are more recognizable and more promising for making sense of the archaeology of how their lives were lived and how they ended, whether they were members of the African Diaspora or not.

Second, a focus on the ‘making of the archaeological’ forces our hand about the presence of the present in our efforts. As archaeologists, we exist because of the archaeological, because the present lacks what was once right here. Yet, how often do we embrace this? Archaeological narratives trend towards the evolutionary, tracking a people through time and recording their ways of life and how and why these changed. We may be moved towards the present, but it is rare that archaeologists in the end actually arrive and engage with how the present itself was formed by erasing (‘making archaeological’) the things that used to be. There remains a wide-spread practice, that is, of embracing a radical break between past and present despite the fact that many archaeologists, especially those researching the African Diaspora, see this break as something basic to what their work helps to overcome.

## **Archaeology and Amnesia on Long Island**

An apt example comes from the Center for Public Archaeology's community open house last summer at Joseph Lloyd Manor in Lloyd Harbor, New York. Directed by my colleague Jenna Coplin, archaeological research at Lloyd Manor is focused on the recovery of data from a late 18th century slave quarter site, a structure that serves as a symbol of among other things the poorly known history of slavery on Long Island. Our investigation has been widely reported in the local press and we have presented the site to several hundred visitors and given many public lectures in the area in the last two years. Our experience has been wonderful, but we have encountered time and again one common theme: a surprise that there ever was slavery on Long Island.

This misunderstanding is an important part of America's grand historical narrative: that slavery was only in the south and that the north was always free, a myth with a multitude of negative effects. It certainly obscures the fact that Long Island had one of the largest populations of enslaved people in the north, and it ignores the impact of slavery on the creation of the Island's early communities. Yet, most profound is the dissociation between the region's past slavery and its present communities. Without a considered recognition that there was slavery on Long Island, its legacy cannot be considered a factor in contemporary life, an understanding that fails Long Islanders in many ways. Most impacted is the struggle by African Americans to confront persistent local structural racism and inequality in schooling, housing, and employment. Supposedly having no background in slavery, African American Long Islanders are thought to be different from and far less deserving than other American black communities. As voluntary migrants from the south and elsewhere, these communities are thought to have been already uplifted by virtue of settling among freedom-loving white communities, who were already there and graciously accepted their new neighbors. In this light, the legacy of slavery on both the local and global scale is washed away by a history that denies an early black presence on Long Island and inaccurately associates all northern whites with a passion for black freedom.

Ultimately, it is Long Island's ongoing and diverse civil rights movement that is most harmed by this amnesia about slavery. Working with a misinformed conception of a

benevolent historic white community, the region's population is highly fractured by race and will remain so as long as white allies in the civil rights struggle are unaware of their own complicity in a history of privilege reaching back to the beginning of Long Island's place in America. Our goal for the Lloyd Manor project was always to bring the importance of knowing more about slavery on Long Island into better perspective, but knowing now that our research exposes a form of historical amnesia about slavery we have found our role and our responsibility amplified. Archaeology is now a component of the ongoing local civil rights movement.

We have worked hard to meet the challenges of this commitment, and we made several important contributions this past summer. With the support of the New York Council for the Humanities and through partnerships with the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, the African American Historic Designation Council of Huntington, ERASE Racism, and a set of committed community volunteers and students, we turned the Lloyd Manor archaeology site into a productive forum for dialogue about the meaning of past slavery to the struggle against racism in Long Island's modern communities. We shared our work with visitors who traveled from New Jersey, New York City, Connecticut, and communities across Long Island, and we were thrilled to co-host a race and racism dialogue event with ERASE Racism ([www.eraseracismny.org](http://www.eraseracismny.org)). Yet, one story best captures the spirit of these efforts. We were honored to have Town of Hempstead Councilwoman Dorothy Goosby attend our open house event in July. Addressing the diverse crowd of guests, the Councilwoman briefly shared the 20-year history of Goosby vs. the Town of Hempstead, a lawsuit that dismantled the Town's at-large voting system, which had long failed to identify and respond to the concerns of Hempstead's African American community. Success in this suit underwrote Goosby's election as the first African American to hold a Town council seat on Long Island. Making a seamless connection between this local African American struggle for social justice during the last 20 years and the same struggle by enslaved people at Lloyd Manor over 200 years ago was powerful. Goosby was not reaching. She was sincere, and we all understood she was right.

Councilwoman Goosby also showed us how archaeology matters. While she is interested in what we have unearthed in the excavations, her main interest was that we had gathered at the site several dozen people from the area who were politically motivated and who

were seeking to add to their knowledge and experience base what archaeology had to offer to their own civil rights agenda. The common admission that people did not know there was slavery on Long Island is one that we read now in a new way. It is not a simple statement of fact, but an exposure of ignorance by many people who want to know more and equally to know why they don't already know what they came to the site to find out. They want to know why slavery on Long Island and its legacy became archaeological.

This example also describes how we may be able to bring soon-to-be President Obama to knowing about African Diaspora archaeology. It is not the histories we produce that will draw him in -- how often does archaeology actually come up with something so radically distinct from what can already be known by following major trends in African Diaspora studies? What we offer is a different way to look at the present as indeed a product of the past, something Obama embraces every time he slips into cadences crafted by Martin Luther King, Jr., but also seeing the present as something formed equally -- though impossibly -- through a denial of the past. In fact, Obama's rhetoric and inspiration would be well dressed in archaeological clothes, for as well as anyone he works with both what the present is as well as what it lacks but formerly had in the way he imagines and now will construct America's future. His victory is an opportunity for us to reckon with our failures. Archaeologists of the African Diaspora should engage the Obama administration by centering the civil rights activism that our work is not only based in but actually materializes and moves forward in simultaneous historical and contemporary perspectives.

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